

Washington's hypocrisy over Iraqi 'war crimes'

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28 March 2003

The Bush administration and the Pentagon have seized on Iraq's treatment of captured US soldiers in an attempt to counter flagging support for a war that has failed to live up to Washington's promises of a speedy campaign of "liberation."

Speaking at Macdill Air Force Base in Florida on Wednesday, Bush condemned Iraqis as "war criminals," even as US bombs and missiles rained down on Baghdad, killing 36 civilians and wounding another 215 on that day alone.

Bush appeared untroubled by the mounting civilian death toll, or for that matter, the casualties suffered by young US soldiers. Half of his speech was taken up with the kind of political backslapping and one-line jokes normally reserved for campaign fundraisers. The rest consisted of a warning to the American people that the war is shaping up to be a long one, and denunciations of Iraqi resistance.

"In the early stages of this war, the world is getting a clearer view of the Iraqi regime and the evil at its heart," he said. "In the ranks of that regime are men whose idea of courage is to brutalize unarmed prisoners. They wage attacks while posing as civilians. They use real civilians as human shields. They pretend to surrender, then fire upon those who show them mercy."

These remarks echoed similar statements by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in a Pentagon press briefing the day before: "The regime has committed acts of treachery on the battlefield, dressing their forces as liberated civilians and sending soldiers out waving white flags and feigning surrender, with the goal of drawing coalition forces into ambushes; using Red Cross vehicles to courier military instructions. These are serious violations of the laws of war."

The Pentagon's spokeswoman condemned Iraqi fighters for "perfidy or treachery." She added, "Some liken these actions to terrorism."

That the US should open up a public relations campaign that centers on denouncing the Iraqis for violating "the laws of war" is truly staggering, even by the perverse standards of the Washington lie machine. The principal law regarding warfare is that no nation has the right to wage an unprovoked war of aggression against another. It was a law that emerged out of two world wars, was codified at the Nuremberg trials of leading Nazis, and enshrined in the founding Charter of the United

Nations.

It is this law that the Bush administration has violated, failing even to obtain the fig leaf of a United Nations resolution authorizing the use of force before sending an invading army into Iraq and bombarding its cities with cruise missiles, satellite-guided munitions and cluster bombs.

At Nuremberg, the first charge in the indictment against the surviving leaders of the Third Reich was conspiracy to wage aggressive war. The prosecutors reasoned that all of the other monstrous crimes carried out by the Nazi regime flowed from this essential one.

So too in Iraq. Whatever acts of brutality occur against the Iraqi people, and whatever the retaliation inflicted on American soldiers—they flow from the Bush administration's illegal war of plunder. American troops would not be ambushed, killed or captured if they had not been sent to invade a country that had carried out no attack whatsoever on the US. The criminal responsibility rests with Washington, which conspired to launch this war and used the technique of the Big Lie to justify it.

Claims that Iraq represented a grave threat because of its supposed "weapons of mass destruction" were backed up with documents that US officials knew to be forgeries. Allegations that the Iraqi regime was somehow tied to those who carried out the terrorist attacks of September 11 were continuously repeated long after they were exposed as lies.

Perhaps the most obscene lie of all was told to American soldiers, who were assured that they were being sent to "liberate" Iraq and would be greeted by its people with ovations and flowers.

Instead, even as US and British commanders have attempted to skirt population centers, the invading forces have confronted relentless armed opposition from not only Iraqi soldiers and militiamen, but also from armed civilians. Lightly armed Iraqis have confronted heavily armored columns backed by helicopter gunships and fighter planes, and have suffered horrendous casualties. Reporters accompanying the US and British units report the roadsides to be littered with Iraqi bodies. Some acknowledge there is widespread popular hatred for the invaders.

US soldiers complain they are unable to distinguish friend

from foe and, in many cases, have responded by firing on anything that moves in areas where they encounter resistance. As a result, Iraqi hospitals are overflowing with casualties, most of them women, children and old men.

The invaders too have suffered losses, though in far smaller numbers. The fear that a greater toll of US and British dead and wounded will turn the American public against this military adventure underlies the outrage expressed by Bush and the Pentagon over Iraqi tactics and, in particular, the filming of American POWs.

As many have pointed out, Washington taking umbrage over violations of the Geneva Conventions is the height of hypocrisy. US forces have freely allowed the filming of surrendering Iraqi troops who are forced to their knees, searched and herded behind barbed wire.

In Afghanistan, the US openly flouted the Geneva Conventions. It is holding Taliban forces incommunicado and brutalizing and humiliating them to the point that suicide attempts have reached epidemic proportions at the Guantanamo prison camp. Two prisoners have reportedly died from torture. There is also damning evidence that US forces participated in the massacre of some 3,000 Taliban supporters who surrendered to US-backed forces following the battle of Mazar-i-Sharif, not to mention the US bombing of the prison fortress itself, which resulted in the slaughter of some 800 captured Taliban troops.

The Geneva Conventions also bar the deliberate targeting of civilian installations, a proscription that the Pentagon acknowledges violating with its missile attacks directed against Iraqi television.

No doubt the Iraqis would prefer to wage the kind of “civilized” war being carried out by the US, but they lack cruise missiles and aircraft carriers that make it possible to kill large quantities of people from hundreds of miles away. Instead they have attempted to answer the US “shock and awe” campaign and demonstrate to the world that the US military is not all-powerful by airing film of the bodies of American troops and wounded and trembling American soldiers being questioned by their Iraqi captors.

“A violation of international law,” the US protests, threatening war crimes trials for those responsible. It will not, however, undertake such proceedings in the newly formed International Criminal Court. Washington has refused to recognize the institution for fear that it could find itself in the dock.

The fact that the US has illegally invaded Iraq with overwhelming military force is of no matter, the administration’s legal experts explain. “Who is right and who is wrong in a war, including who started it, does not matter,” said Ruth Wedgwood, a professor of international law at the Johns Hopkins University. “Even if you think the war is illegal, the rules of war still apply.” Often quoted for her legal expertise on why the US war of aggression is permissible, Ms.

Wedgwood is a member of both the “Committee to Liberate Iraq” and the Pentagon’s Defense Policy Board. Her statements only confirm that defenders of US atrocities, prepared to offer up any sophistry or lie, can be readily found in the halls of academia.

The claim that the invaders and the invaded, the oppressor and the oppressed, must all be held to the same abstract legal and moral code is worthy only of contempt.

The complaints of armed Iraqis using ruses—including fake surrenders—to ambush American troops echo US denunciations of the National Liberation Front guerrillas during the Vietnam War. In that war too US officials claimed they were carrying out carefully targeted military strikes while working to win the “hearts and minds” of the people. The end result was a million Vietnamese dead, the killing of 55,000 American soldiers and a US debacle.

The same kinds of accusations were leveled by the French against the FLN rebels in Algeria and by the British against rebellious subjects in India, Africa and Iraq itself some 80 years ago, when Britain was attempting to colonize the area.

Enjoying overwhelming superiority of arms—in the Iraq of the 1920s the British army would call in strikes by warplanes equipped with mustard gas bombs—the invading, oppressor nations have always denounced the oppressed for failing to observe the norms of “civilized” warfare.

What they have condemned as “savage” and a “war crime” is their opponents’ use of their only advantage—that it is their country and their people and that they are more willing to die to defend it than the invader is to conquer it. Experience has shown that this advantage ultimately weighs more on the scales of history than superior military technology.

Even if the US-British invasion force succeeds in occupying Baghdad, Basra and all the other population centers in this country of 23 million—and at the moment this is by no means certain—they will face a protracted occupation and clashes that will claim the lives of American soldiers for years to come. Sooner rather than later, the combination of Iraqi resistance and the outrage of working people in America and around the world over this illegal war will force an ignominious end to the attempt to revive colonialism in the Middle East.



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